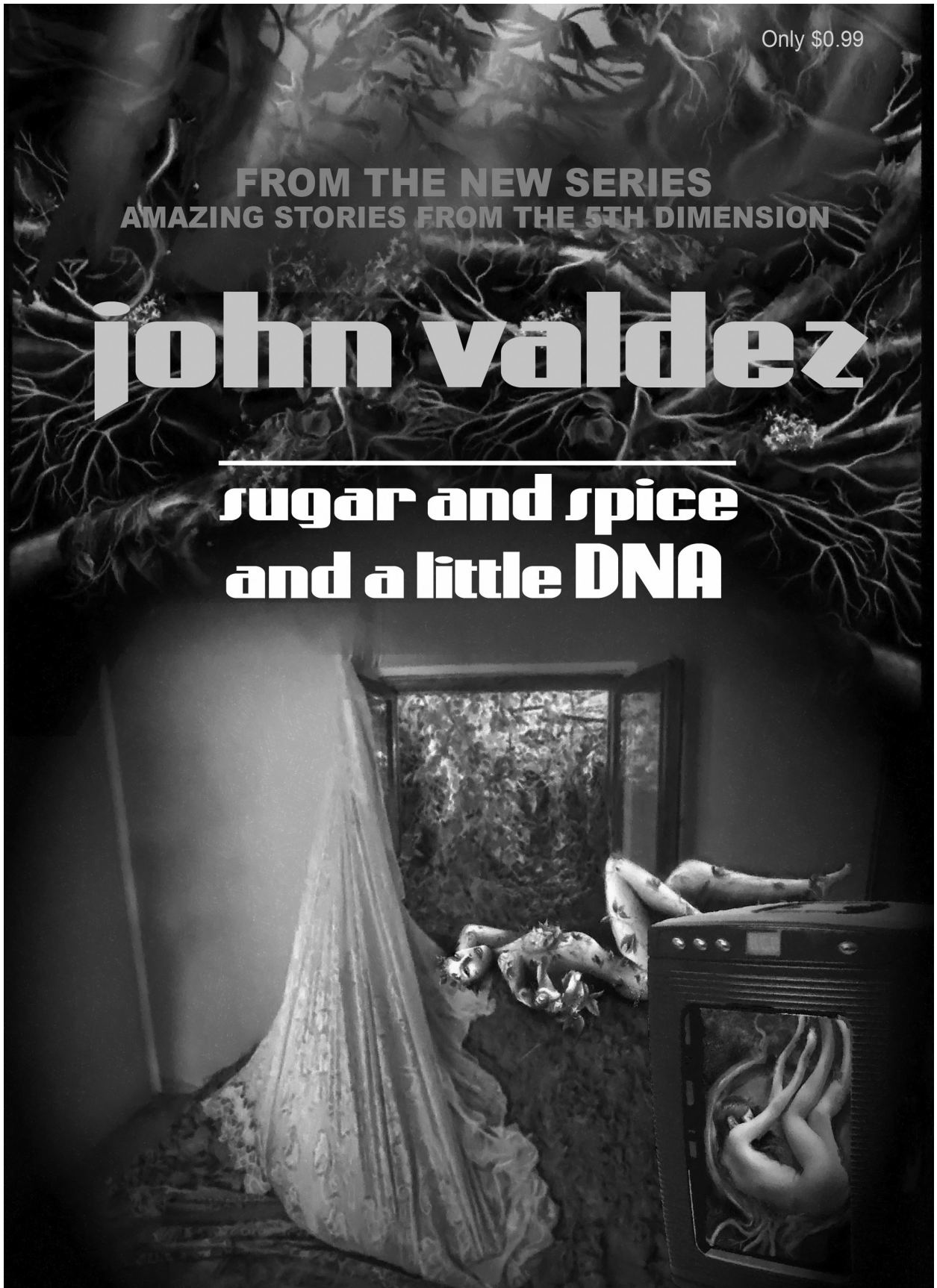


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john valdez

**sugar and spice
and a little DNA**



SUGAR AND SPICE AND A LITTLE DNA

By John Valdez

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Prologue

Delbert Finney, a lonely young man with a just a hint of being on the edge—for the same reason that people usually go off the deep end, he takes a chance with technology. His friends and family call him Del because he is a sweet young man, the kind of guy you can bring home to mother, if you were his girlfriend that is. And , it's his unlucky faith in love that has brought him to a moment of desperateness which takes him down a botanical lover's lane; one where a mate can be grown from a seed in a mechanical box. Remarkably by this point, the industry of love has realized that you can sell the seeds of romance which if grown properly can take a man like Del to new heights in a relationship that he can only achieve in the 5th dimension.

Del, never thought he would be doing this. Organics were never his thing, so maybe in his thoughts he was just sinking to a new low? If that's possible—with the women in his life dumping on him all the time, it's basically time for something new. If plan A doesn't work, get a plan B. Which is what he always says or does, and it seems to work.

Mostly—speaking to himself in his thoughts, “Yep, things are just fine when I go that route. There's a choice few out there who think I'm sick for doing this. I could be half-cocked—it's because these organics—they're not human. So what? Who really comes off human these days, especially if they're born in California? It's the kind of thing I just wonder about since graduating high school. All of which has brought me to this point, this moment in time, standing here in my first apartment with the seeds of love in my right hand clenched so tight in my fist—right in front of my new GrowCo Replimat Incubator.” He had to read the sign on the control panel just one more time:

1. **Add predefined seeds in SLOT-A**
2. **Set dial to AUTO**
3. **Activate GREEN power switch**
4. **When finished, activate WASH/SATURATE switch**

His mind raced with anticipation, “So. Just drop the seeds into the incubator and in twenty-four hours, PRESTO!—a brand new girl of my dreams pops out of this contraption. Simple—maybe. Does DNA really matter? It's weird. We're not even in the same phylum. On the other hand—the upside is she can't get pregnant.”

He couldn't help but think aloud by this point, “‘More plant than animal’ is what they say in the ad. My ex had legs like a cactus—wonder where she fits in. The rep said it's guaranteed that I can't tell the difference. Hmmm...I wonder. He hinted I would probably like organics better—but I don't know. This is like going on a carnival ride after eating too much; you know you shouldn't, but you just have to have that ride. It's the human thing. This plant woman though—she's not human—she's like a person. But, not a person, a plant thing, but not a really a plant. A plant woman. An organic. I don't know—like is she real? I guess there's only one way to find out,” Del just continued his mental conversation somewhat vocal and mostly in a whisper. It helped him keep calm about what he was doing—the steps he was taking.

Del was thumbing through the manual a bit, not really paying much attention. He thought about how he needed a better life as he looked out the window through to the balcony he shared. His apartment was 224—he shared the balcony with 226. The lady next door was deaf and didn't clean up like she should. Del was disgusted a bit at the trash which spilled into his side all the time. This time it was filled with last night's left-overs. It looked like rotten fish. As usual, it attracted those nasty pincer bugs and that transient girl who was out there asleep on the ledge. He looked on as she slept, wondering how she could lay in the papers and crud that was always out there. How did she climb to the second floor? The lady had all kinds of animals over there so he never went out on the balcony. It was just filthy. He drew the curtains half thinking he should call the police to remove her again. They never do it though. It was too much of a distraction. He turned to the manual again and picked up the seeds.

The seeds slid down the funnel as he slammed his open fist down on the top of the incubator. Sliding the dial to AUTO was easy enough and then activating the green power switch. Nothing happened. Del had dropped the seeds into the correct slot. He read the directions: Do not drop any seeds into SLOT-A until the organic catalyst is added to the incubator. Del looked inside the incubator. He could see the seeds but couldn't quite reach them with his fingers. He ran into the kitchen, tripping over the box the incubator came in. The box was as big as a refrigerator, laying

sideways on the floor right where he left it after sliding it off the unit. He came back with a pair of tongs. He then methodically removed each seed one by one trying to hide his desperation when he noticed his reflection on the shiny new machine. With as simple as the instructions were, he was embarrassed if only to himself since he would never tell this story to anyone. Irritated, but mostly bemused, thinking the machine should do all this work for you anyway or at the very least paste a reminder to add the catalyst on the front of the machine.

Mixing the catalyst was like cooking. It required two cups of water, sugar and a packet that smelled like nutmeg. When the ingredients were combined, they created a light, sticky brown milk. Del added the catalyst and then the seeds, repeating the process over again. The seeds started to bubble and the machine lit up like a Christmas tree. There was a low hum and light vibration to the unit. A steady beep like a heart rhythm monitor came on and Del walked over to the couch and plopped down on it, as if he'd come home from a hard day's work. It was Saturday. The unit glistened as it cooked the seeds or whatever it does. What more could a guy ask for? He thought about how insane he'd become—out right desperate to do this. If he doesn't like this thing, he thought about how he might be able to get the money back. That was it—get the money back. Deny that rep any satisfaction.

Del fell asleep on the couch in the next room. The heart monitor continued its steady rhythm while the incubator beeped and hummed. It grew the seeds overnight as Del slept through to Sunday morning. He jumped up as the sunlight shined in his eyes and a fly crawled on his face.

“What...oh, what a night, I thought I...” as Del paused speaking to himself, he scurried over to the machine realizing he really did buy a GrowCo Replimat Incubator. It continued to operate as before without any change. He rounded the other side still trying to shake off the sleep, “OW! Oh God...” he looked down to see the blood on the floor—he had stepped on the tongs he left on the floor last night which had cut just inside the palm of his foot. Del found himself hopping to the bathroom, his bleeding foot in one hand and a towel out of the closet cupping the top of his foot in the other. Frustrated, he quickly showered, dressed, bandaged his foot and rushed out to catch the Sunday sermon he had promised his mother he would attend. He never gave the incubator or its progress a second thought.

Del spent the day with his mother not really paying attention to the time like he should have. About dinner time the incubator door opened. Out stepped a beautiful auburn haired woman, totally naked and dripping with bead like sweat. It was the exact time that Jena would come in to clean up in the apartment. Del's mother couldn't stand the thought of having Del alone in that dingy little place right after graduation, so she arranged the cleaning service since it was the only thing a working mother could do. When the cleaning lady entered the house, she went straight for the lounge. She opened the door, expecting no one, “Oh, I'm sorry! Excuse me. I know you don't know me—I was sent from the agency. I was under the impression there was no one home?”

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